

April 22, 2005- The New GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century

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In 1944, the Congress enacted the original GI Bill of Rights, first drafted by the American Legion to honor the Greatest Generation. In doing so, the federal government honored the service of our returning troops with educational benefits, loans to buy a home, and medical assistance. Nearly 8 million veterans have gone to school under the GI Bill. In effect, the GI bill jumpstarted our economy and created a strong middle class. And in each major military conflict since, we have honored the service of our soldiers through a new GI bill.

Over 1 million brave Americans have served thus far in Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom. More than 1,500 service personnel have died and another 12,000 have been wounded. Over 340,000 of our National Guard and Reserve have made unprecedented contributions to the effort in the past two and one-half years - accounting for nearly half of the troops in Iraq. These troops have served our nation with distinction, and it is time for a grateful nation to honor that service.

With this in mind, I firmly believe that now is the appropriate time for a new GI Bill, which is why I am proud to join my fellow House Democrats in introducing the New GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century. This is a package that every West Virginian and every American can be proud of. We see "Support Our Troops" stickers and magnets across our state; with this New GI Bill of Rights we can turn those words into action.

This package would improve benefits for our men and women in uniform today and provide long overdue benefits for the veterans and military retirees who have already served. It would bolster our support for our troops, as well as their families here at home. Further, there are special provisions for the National Guard and Reserve, as their service in Iraq and Afghanistan has been above the call of duty. It would provide better education, health care and job training benefits for those who have answered the calls of our Nation.

For military retirees and the families of those who died in the line of duty, the New GI Bill of Rights would fully repeal the Disabled Veterans Tax, and end the Military Families Tax. These unfair taxes penalize our disabled military retirees and the widows of those lost as a result of combat, and it is long past time for us to eliminate these taxes.

The package would also improve veterans' health care, including mental health care, to meet the needs of our returning troops. Those who have answered the call to duty should be able to rely on the promises of the nation for which they fought. We must live up to our promise and provide needed health care benefits to our returning veterans.

For our troops, the package would modernize and enhance the GI Bill - providing the full cost for college or job training, instead of only 65 percent for those serving four years of active duty. These provisions are important to help our returning soldiers become a productive part of a prosperous economy, and also provide an important recruiting tool to encourage new soldiers to sign up.

It also includes provisions to ensure our troops have the equipment they need to do their jobs, and it would provide a \$1,000 bonus to the nearly 1 million who have served in imminent danger in Operation Iraqi Freedom and in Afghanistan. The strain on our troops has already taken its toll, with our military having trouble recruiting and retaining a strong force. Hundreds of thousands of citizen soldiers are serving in some cases up to three tours of duty, and communities back home are raising money to pay for body armor for our men and women on the front-line. The New GI Bill would help alleviate some of these troubling developments.

No other group of Americans has stood stronger and braver for our democracy than our troops and veterans. We must celebrate, honor and remember these courageous and faithful men and women through this New GI Bill of Rights.

On the battlefield, the military pledges to leave no soldier behind. As a nation, let it be our pledge that when they return home, we leave no veteran behind. Let us honor their service with a New GI Bill of Rights worthy of our grateful nation.